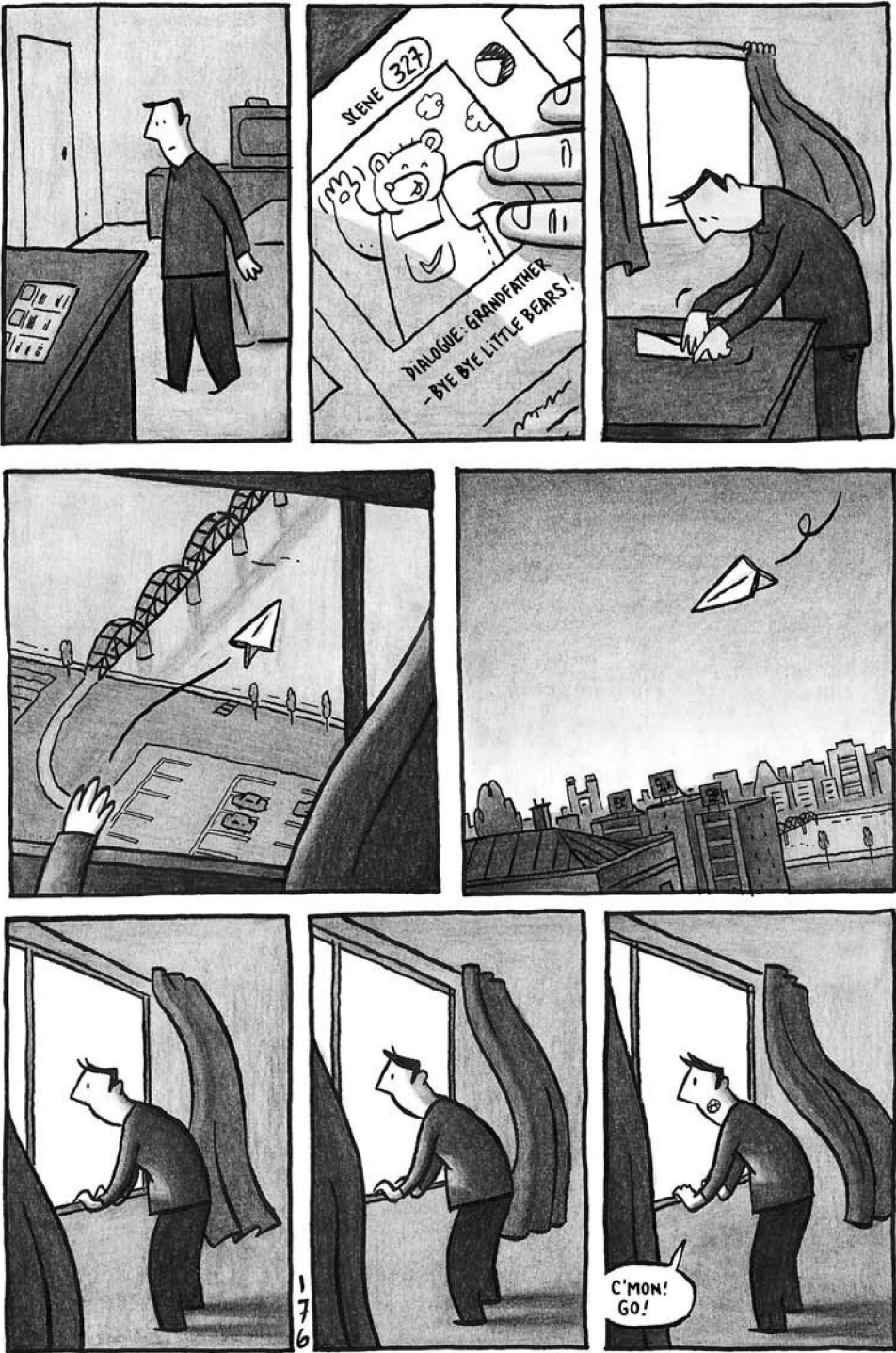


FEATURE

REINVENTING THE BOOK CLUB



Graphic Novels as Educational Heavyweights

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We often find ourselves lamenting the loss of emergent readers to video games, television, and, most recently, the TTYL (talk/type to you later) culture of text messaging and Internet social networking. Trying to impart the joy of a good read to middle school students feels like pushing religion onto the perfectly content worshippers of American Idol. Yet, almost as if responding to a distress call, a new type of book has come onto the scene: the graphic novel. This revitalized genre has not only saved the day for recreational reading, it has also turned out to be a heavyweight in the teaching of advanced themes in literature and visual literacy.

When Brandeis Hillel Day School in San Francisco offered a library-sponsored book club as an elective class, no one ever imagined that we would have a waiting list. After one semester the Graphic Novels Book Group elective became the talk of the middle school. Further, students who had dutifully read only required books in the past, continued to return to the school library well after the elective was finished to check out prose fiction for recreational reading. The elective confirms the impact of a Graphic Novels Book Group on reading motivation.

It all began the previous year, when my colleague, head librarian Roz Tolson, and I were tossing around the idea for a librarian-led elective that could compete with attractive alternatives like Drama, Digital Video-Making, Triathlon, and Yearbook. With graphic novels sales estimated at over \$300 million in 2006 (Publishers Weekly 2007) and the increased buzz in professional publications (Kan 2006), we decided to propose a Graphic Novels Book Group. After

getting an enthusiastic reception from the Middle School administration, the stage was set for the Library's foray into the elective curriculum.

Before planning this elective, I could count on one hand the number of graphic novels I'd read. I considered the genre to be enjoyably quirky, but mostly irrelevant. As I sorted through the recommended lists and talked with the staff in a comic book store (collection development for graphic novels does not lend itself to ordering from reviews) and fellow librarians, I found myself struggling to select titles that would accommodate the wide variation in maturity I expected to find in our mixed sixth- through eighth-grade electives. I rejected *The Pride of Baghdad*, a story of the zoo animals who roamed the Iraqi streets during the chaos of the 2003 bombings. One full-page image of a giraffe's gruesome demise felt just too disturbing for our younger students. On the other hand, I did select *Persepolis*, which contains violent imagery, but depicted in a less violent, cartoonish style. By navigating this tricky line, I gained the respect of my students; they appreciated being trusted with mature content, and this led to greater investment in the class.

The graphic novel genre prides itself on its edginess. For example, the Action Philosophers comic book series by Fred Van Lente and Ryan Dunlavey is full of immature jokes, gratuitous violence, and crass imagery. It's also one of the best things published for philosophical education since the Symposiums. Students are introduced to complicated philosophical concepts without having to trudge through five hundred pages of academic

prose. Our middle school students laugh at Karl Marx with an M-60, but they are only able to get the joke if they've understood concepts that most of us grappled to comprehend in college. The series was too edgy to be included as *required* reading for the elective, but we selected some for the library and they never stay on the shelf for more than half a day.

At the outset of the elective, there was quite a gap in experience among my students. Five didn't know what the term "graphic novel" meant, while the rest spent entire weekends sitting on the floor of the local bookstore devouring *manga*. Therefore I began with a discussion of the term "graphic novel" using the ideas outlined in Charles McGrath's watershed article in the July 11, 2004 issue of *The New York Times Magazine*. Graphic novelist Chester Brown drew the magazine's cover, a nine panel interview between a journalist and a graphic novelist. The graphic novelist in Brown's cover is defending himself against the accusation that his medium is "just comic books." He argues that "the scope for telling stories of greater complexity and depth is increased" (Brown 2004, cover) in longer comic books. When the story continues from the cover into the magazine (25), the interviewer has been transformed into a duck. Infuriated by this visual mockery, the novelist storms out of his graphic interview.

I ask the students why Chester Brown chose this little story to accompany an article that argues that graphic novels should be taken seriously, and that "comic books are what novels used to be" (McGrath 2004, 24). The students recognize at once that a comic book's tone is distinct from prose fiction. In Brown's comic, for example, the sequence from

one panel to the next is tinged with both humor and irony. Unlike prose fiction, comics depict the passage of time visually, as the reader moves from one panel to the next. Artists such as Brown become masters at exploiting the kind of humor that arises from this type of narrative motion. In a snap, a human becomes a duck. Over the course of the semester, students continued to find other examples of this simultaneous use of both irreverence and a self-reflective silliness. And how twelve year-olds love self-reflective silliness!

What was remarkable to me, on that very first day of class, was that the students identified and responded to the poignancy of the stories immediately. The jokes, the conclusions, and the characters made sense at once. How often, I wondered, did they assimilate and understand assigned readings in their other classes so quickly? Throughout the elective I continued to be surprised by my students' responses. More than just an elective or a book group, our experience together went right to the heart of books and the joy of reading.

The structure of that first class determined how I approached each week's "lesson." For example, I continued to use readings, primarily from McCloud's *Understanding Comics* and its companion *Making Comics*, to apply to the graphic novels we read. McCloud's analysis of visual literacy is always accompanied by visual examples (the book itself is a long comic). He outlines a theory of comics as an art form and a mode of storytelling while modeling them in his drawings. We had animated discussions about the cultural and social implications of these texts. Different ideas appealed to different students. Some disputed whether

McCloud's identification of ancient Mayan writing as proto-comics was accurate. Others focused on the role of visual storytelling in a visually saturated culture like ours, using examples of codes and signs based on McCloud's lucid explanation of semantics. Their engagement demonstrated to me what theorists like Janne Seppanen and McCloud postulate: that visual literacy is "the capacity to perceive the visible reality as part of broader cultural structures of meanings . . . the most essential thing thus is the understanding of the mechanisms of culture and the meaning of production in society" (Seppanen 2007, 133).

According to McCloud, every graphic novelist must make certain decisions when creating a page (or more) of panels. As we discussed each graphic novel we applied McCloud's "five choices" (2006, 37), a framework that helped students understand how a visual artist develops a meaningful image for a story. We discussed each decision—choice of moment, choice of frame, choice of image, choice of word, and choice of flow—to analyze what was being presented to the reader.

The sequential images on the final page of Guy Delisle's graphic novel travelogue, *Pyongyang* (see p. 44), can be analyzed with this framework. The page consists of three panels at the top, two in the middle, and three at the bottom. Delisle's *choice of moment* includes creating a paper airplane, a snapshot of the airplane mid-flight, and Guy Delisle, a character himself, watching and cheering from the window as the lonely paper airplane descends from the author's skyscraper hotel window. The first two panels show Delisle having the idea of making the airplane, and then

beginning to fold it. The middle two panels show the flight of the airplane. The last three panels at the bottom of the page occur in an extremely close chronology, (perhaps not even seconds apart). In these almost identical panels, Delisle watches the plane cross the skyline.

In the middle two panels, *the choice of frame* (or context) juxtaposes the whimsical flight of a paper airplane against the stark Pyongyang skyline, emphasizing the emotional contrast in the story. The last three panels exclude most of the hotel room to focus the reader on the main character as he watches the plane out the window.

In one panel, for *choice of image*, Delisle draws the airplane on its own, separate from the person who threw it. This choice suggests the freedom that the paper airplane has from its creator, in contrast to the highly controlled lives of citizens in North Korea.

His *choice of words*, or rather lack of them, fits these themes. There are no words until the very last panel, reinforcing the understated tone of the whole novel. Finally, in the character's cheer "C'mon, go!" the reader becomes acutely aware of the poignancy of small rebellions in a repressive world.

For the *choice of flow*, or how the reader follows the sequence of the panels, Delisle imitates the journey of the airplane, with its curlicue trail sequentially on the last page. He could have concluded the book with a full page panel, or three panels in rows. Instead, his choice of three panels at the top, two in the middle, and three at the bottom creates a looping through the page as it is read. The flow of the story, through

the panel arrangement, matches the flow of the airplane, the flowing of the curtains, and even the flow of Delisle's body hunched over the windowsill. In short, each choice on this magnificent last page contributed to evoking in the reader the emotions that accompany Delisle's futile resistance to North Korea's litter-free totalitarian regime.

Later that semester, another of our readings led to an exploration of themes in visual literacy—Gene Yang's National Book Award-nominated graphic novel, *American Born Chinese* (FirstSecond, 2006). In this graphic novel, the main character, Jin, is frustrated with being a cultural outsider in suburban America. He begins to see himself as his alter-ego, the blue-eyed, blond-haired, all-American boy "Danny." In turn, this Danny is haunted by a character that embodies all the stereotypes of Chinese people, a "cousin" named Chin-Kee. I introduced the students to a foundational theory in the symbolic interactionism school of sociology, Charles Horton Cooley's concept of "The Looking Glass Self," which suggests that we see ourselves as we imagine others see us ("Cooley, Charles Horton" 2005, 153–154). My students interpreted Yang's visual depiction of the characters and story as larger statements about the immigrant experience in America. One student said that *American Born Chinese* "showed exclusion and questioned what is 'normal.'" I was stunned that my students could learn to deeply question how cultures are shown and seen, an important aspect of visual literacy as Seppanen defines it:

Visual literacy also means the ability to conceive the historical quality of visual

orders and the power processes connected with them as well as to distinguish alternative orders. Visual literacy is thus not only an understanding of the visible reality, but at its best it is also the production of such presentations that challenge pictorial stereotypes connected, for instance, to the presentation of race and gender. (94)

In addition to being an excellent exercise in the understanding the presentation of race and ethnicity visually, *American Born Chinese* challenges readers' observation skills. The book consists of three separate and intertwining narratives involving Jin, Danny, Chin-Kee, and an archetype from Chinese mythology, the Monkey King. Deceptively simple at first reading, the structure builds a complex and extended metaphor and produces the poignant ending, which is easy to miss if read too fast. Therefore I encouraged students to read graphic novels slowly and, in fact, they often came to class having read the book twice. Successful readers of graphic novels learn that rereading and slow reading support close observation, a necessary skill of visual literacy.

For the last part of each class, the students worked on their own individual, forty-panel graphic novels. As creators and artists, they attempted to apply their understanding of the basic elements of visual storytelling. First, I asked them to develop a main character and a distinct beginning, middle, and end. Then we practiced learning to change scenarios (for example, "they're on a bad date") into storytelling ("my main character goes on horrible date after horrible date

until she finds the right person"). Once they had created a character and plot, they turned to Comic Life (free software that comes with Mac OS) to create their visual stories. This easy-to-use software includes templates with pre-designed panel layouts and drag-and-drop speech bubbles. Creating their own comics consolidated what they were learning as readers. A few months after the class ended, one of my students said, "The class was different than a regular book group because we weren't just reading it, we were doing it too."

In my experience, middle school students are ready to engage with intense emotions, emotions that they are themselves experiencing for the first time, but they need appropriate material. My students crave stories that they can relate to, written in a language they can understand, with jokes they can get, and metaphors that are clear to them. What adults get from Jonathan Franzen, Dave Eggers, and Zadie Smith, my students got from Guy Delisle. Graphic novels provided them with a rich and rewarding literary experience at a time when the duration, vocabulary, and style of prose masterpieces cannot. A seventh grader marveled: "We didn't just read the story; we read the story behind the story."

This elective held surprises for everyone, including me. For example, I did not anticipate the ripple effects of this "reinvented" book club. At the beginning of the semester, some of my elective students felt that the library and the librarian had nothing to offer them for recreational reading. Now they regularly seek me out for fiction recommendations—and not just for graphic novels. One seventh-grade elective student has read both Mark Zuckas's *The Book Thief* and M. T.

Anderson's *The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing*.

As my colleague, Roz Tolson, and I infuse graphic novels into other grades, we see similar leaps in reading. Fourth- and fifth-grade students, emboldened by their reading of long graphic novels like Jeff Smith's *Bone* and Larry Gonick's *Cartoon History of the Universe*, are now attempting sophisticated prose fiction. And our success is spreading. Our teaching colleagues have begun using graphic novels to increase students' confidence as readers and to develop their enjoyment of reading. Instead of heralding a regression from the art of the written word, we are finding that graphic novels are providing a new bridge to it.

Tips for Choosing Graphic Novels

- Read the whole graphic novel before adding it to the collection.
- Talk to people who already know about graphic novels, especially

the managers at comic stores and librarians who have already done collection development in graphic novels.

- Read reviews, but don't purchase based solely on a review. Just one gory page could put a graphic novel over the line of what you are comfortable including in the school library. Be guided by selection criteria in your Selection Policy.
- Have a discussion with students about the responsibility that comes with reading mature content like *Persepolis* or *Action Philosophers*.
- Encourage younger students to read the more kid-friendly graphic novels, like Jeff Smith's *Bone* series.
- Watch out for the cheap low-quality graphic novels that lack discernible storylines. Trust your own instincts about quality and be picky.
- Limit the amount of manga (Japanese comic books) in

the collection so that students will move beyond it to more sophisticated graphic novels and prose novels. Most series of manga can be given similar treatment in the library as prose series like *The Babysitters Club* or *Goosebumps*.

- There is not a single or standard age-rating system for graphic novels, so don't depend on the age ratings on the back covers. They are only general guides.

This article, a bibliography of graphic novels used in our book club, and sample of student work are available online: <www.ala.org/ala/aasl/aaslpubsandjournals/kqweb/kqarchives/volume36/363/363seyfried.cfm>.

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